

Story Archives

Keyword Search:

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Advanced Search

TDI -- Features
Archive

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- 06.01.07 -- Building History: A father-and-son team puts heritage trolleys back on city streets
- 05.31.07 -- Tacoma Streetcar: End of the line, 130 miles north
- 05.09.07 -- State award for Index's historic preservation coverage
- 04.19.07 -- BIA Bike Patrol: All eyes (and wheels) on the street
- 03.21.07 -- Mightier Than Swords: Tacoma's political cartoonists
- 01.17.07 -- Streetcar Desires
- 12.27.06 -- The Dead Zone: Critics say two crumbling downtown garages kill the city's energy
- 12.12.06 -- Putting History in the City's Future: An interview with Reuben McKnight
- 11.21.06 -- History Makers: Tacoma's historic preservation scene
- 01.31.08 -- Citizens group turns its attention toward Port of Tacoma
- 10.05.06 -- Hall Monitors: A growing online community focuses its attention on the city
- 10.02.06 -- Former Tacoma broadcaster tunes into Winthrop's future
- 07.20.06 -- One Downtown, Two Different Pictures

Tacoma Blogs

BIA
Exit 133
Feed Tacoma
Flickr Tacoma
Forward Tacoma
Kevin Freitas
New Takhoman

TACOMA
Daily
Index

BACK

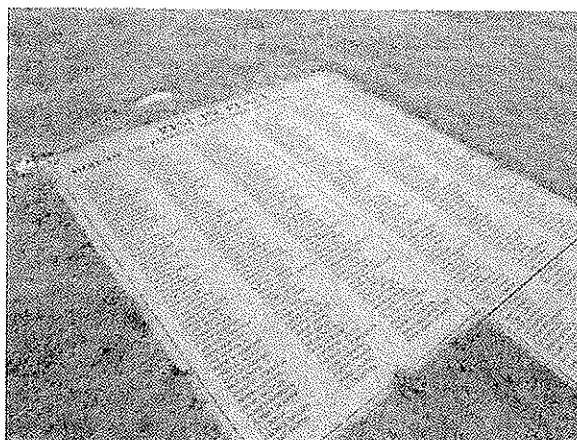
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FEEDBACK

50 grave markers planned for historic Western State Hospital cemetery

Apr
06
2009

The



(COURTESY PHOTO)

In 2006, the Grave Concerns Association, a group of community members and staff volunteers at Western State Hospital dedicated to the restoration of the hospital's cemetery, installed a marker for the cremated remains of former Western State Hospital patients.

Grave Concerns Association, a group of community members and staff volunteers at Western State Hospital who operate as a 501-C3 organization dedicated to the restoration of the hospital's cemetery, announced today it will replace 50 stone markers during May, which is Mental Health Awareness Month.

Called "Dignity for 50," this effort is supported by the Regional Organizing Initiative of the Mental Health Transformation Grant as a vehicle to bring involved consumers from Greater Puget Sound together in an effort to combat stigma.

"With each numbered stone we replace, we erase some of the stigma of mental illness and restore the dignity and respect of that person," said Laurel Lemke, an 18-year employee of Western State Hospital and the chair of the Grave Concerns Association.

According to the Grave Concerns Association, Western State Hospital staff member John Lucas

When In Tacoma . . .

Beautiful Angle
 Blackwater Coffee
 Buzzard's Discs
 Capers (Downtown)
 Corina Bakery
 Farmers Market
 (Downtown & Dome
 District)
 Grand Cinema
 Hello, Cupcake
 King's Books
 Link Light Rail
 Love Tacoma
 Margaret's Cafe
 Matador (Downtown)
 Meconi's
 MOG
 Northwest Room (TPL)
 Paddy Coyne's
 (Downtown)
 South Sound Running
 (Downtown)
 Tacoma Art Supply
 Tacoma Book Center
 Tacoma Culture (Historic
 Preservation)
 Tacoma Historical
 Society Museum
 Tacoma Rainiers
 TAM
 UWT Bookstore
 Vin Grotto
 Working Waterfront
 Museum

**City / County /
Region**

City of Tacoma
 Pierce County
 Port of Tacoma
 Pierce Transit
 Sound Transit

**Colleges /
Universities**

Pierce College
 Tacoma Community
 College
 University of Puget
 Sound
 UW Tacoma

Civic Organizations

Chamber of Commerce
 City Club
 Historic Tacoma
 Tacoma Club
 World Trade Center
 Tacoma

launched the first effort in 2000 to bring attention to the long forgotten cemetery. While holding a simple ceremony over a few visible graves, hospital patients started to uncover additional markers laying beneath prairie grasses in a field near the old dairy barns that once served the hospital. That discovery began an effort to restore the cemetery and replace the numbered markers with markers featuring the name, birthdate and date of death of each patient buried in the cemetery.

More than 3,200 psychiatric patients from Western State Hospital were buried in the cemetery between 1876 and 1953. At the time, the graves were only marked with numbers -- an attempt to protect the privacy of hospital patients.

Today, with a general realization that people with mental illness should bear no shame or stigma, Grave Concerns has been raising private funds to replace the numbered markers with gravestones that include the patients' names, birthdates and date of death. Each marker costs \$40 and 120 markers have been replaced to date, as well as a stone memorial with 500 patient names.

"This project restores dignity to the once-nameless patients buried here," said Jill SanJule, Regional Organizing Initiative program manager. "It also helps educate the community, lessening fear and creating a better understanding of mental illness."

Ceremonies to place the new grave markers will be held from 9am to noon on Sat., April 18 and Sat., May 30 in Lakewood at the historical Western State Hospital Cemetery located at 8714 9th Ave. SW in Fort Steilacoom Park. The community is encouraged to participate.